



## QRIS RESOURCE GUIDE: SECTION 9 CONSUMER EDUCATION

Assisting parents in understanding, choosing, and evaluating early and school-age care and education programs is one of the primary reasons States create a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS). For a system to be successful, however, messages should be designed for various audiences to promote its value to a wide range of stakeholders. This section addresses a variety of strategies for reaching parents, consumers, and providers, as well as building support among policymakers, State and community leaders, and funders.

In *Stair Steps to Quality*, Mitchell (2005) notes:

“Not everyone will see the inherent benefits of QRS. Some may oppose QRS due to ideological concerns, which frequently include the belief that child care minimizes the role of parents. A strategy employed by supporters of QRS is listening to concerns, seeking common ground based on what is good for children, and responding with facts that explain why the QRS is being developed. Research on program quality is often part of the explanation, along with affirmation that parents are children’s first teachers and that many children are in out-of home programs because their parents work” (p. 18).

### Reaching Parents and Consumers

QRIS provide a framework for educating parents about the importance of quality in early care and education. Providers may be more likely to participate in QRIS when parents begin to value the rating process and ask about the QRIS rating when choosing child care.

#### ***Factors influencing parent choice***

A body of evidence suggests that the quality of early care and education services across the Nation often falls below “good” on Environment Rating Scale assessments, with an alarming number of programs rated as “inadequate” and potentially harmful to children’s development. However, 96 percent of parents believe that all child care providers offer learning opportunities for children, and 78 percent believe that all providers are trained in child development before working with children (National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, 2009). Parents are often unaware of or do not understand the factors that indicate quality, and they are not familiar with their State’s licensing requirements. Others may be unwilling to acknowledge that their child is not receiving high-quality care. In addition, low literacy levels and limited English proficiency may also be barriers to accessing information. The Center for Law and Social Policy has several reports on meeting the needs of young children of immigrants and families with limited English proficiency. Additional information is available at <http://www.clasp.org/issues/child-care-and-early-education/topics/cultural-competency>.

In a November 2008 poll, parents identified safety, a learning environment with trained teachers, and cost as the three most important factors when choosing child care (National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, 2009). Earlier studies reflect that parents care about health and safety, how children get along with each other and with adults, opportunities for learning, the personality of the staff, and the program philosophy (Mitchell, 2005). Although it is important to educate parents on research-based quality criteria, using terms that reflect what parents in specific States understand and value will make the QRIS more meaningful to them.

A February 2011 brief entitled *Understanding Parents' Child Care Decision-Making: A Foundation for Child Care Policy Making*, provides a graphic to illustrate a complex decision-making process shaped by parent and child characteristics, parent values, beliefs, and preferences, community and employment characteristics as well as a set of opportunities, constraints and barriers (Weber, 2011). The report also notes that "Parental employment and family and child well-being outcomes flow from the decision-making process, but child care decisions are seldom one-time occurrences. For example, parents change jobs, or employers change work schedules. Children outgrow arrangements, or parents decide that arrangements are not good for children. Changes in child care subsidy policies or relatively small changes in earnings can make a family ineligible or reduce the benefit amount" (p. 7). Child care decisions must often be made quickly, making ready access to information even more important. The full brief is available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/resource/understanding-parents-child-care-decision-making-a-foundation-for-child>.

## MINNESOTA STUDIES PARENT CHOICES

**Parent Aware** for School Readiness (PASR) sponsors a Parent Aware Ratings campaign including radio, online, TV and neighborhood ads that drive consumers to [parentawareratings.org](http://parentawareratings.org). A 2013 random sample survey of Minnesota parents of 0-5 year olds found that:

- 61 percent of parents who recall the ads say the ads "made them stop and think about the need to have pre-kindergarten children in stimulating learning environments"
- 72 percent of parents who can recall the ads agreed that "all parents should be asking questions about a child care provider's Parent Aware Rating"
- 78 percent of Minnesota parents of young children who recall the ads say that if all other things are equal, they would choose a rated provider over an unrated one, while only 4 percent would choose an unrated provider.

More information is available at <http://www.pasrmn.org/>

## ARIZONA PARENT SURVEY

The *Arizona Child Care Demand Study* (2012) is a large-scale, survey-based research project, designed to find out when and why Arizona parents use child care; how they make child care decisions; and what they think about the quality, cost and accessibility of early care and education programs in their communities.

First Things First commissioned a team of researchers from the University of Arizona, Arizona State University and Northern Arizona University to conduct detailed interviews of more than 1,300 parents from across the state, asking them about the early care and education arrangements they have made, or wish they could make, for their kids. The full study is available at <http://www.azftf.gov/WhoWeAre/Board/Documents/FTF-ChildCareReport.pdf>. Additional information is available at <http://qualityfirstaz.gov/parents-and-families/quality-first/>.

In addition, new work being done by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation using behavioral economics is underway to learn how insights and tools from behavioral science can be used to communicate the value of quality child care. Using behavioral science, researchers are working to identify what factors shape parents' decisions, as well as what interferes with decision making, and hope to use the information to inform effective outreach and communication strategies to increase the number of parents seeking quality child care, as indicated by quality rating and improvement systems.

## ***Educating the public and parents about the rating system***

Most QRIS award easily recognizable symbols, such as stars, to programs to indicate the levels of quality. Most people understand a rating system with stars because of its use with the hotel and restaurant industries, e.g., five-star hotel. An early and school-age care and education program's voluntary participation in the system should be viewed as a commitment to quality improvement. Parents need to understand that even ratings at the lower levels mean that the program has exceeded minimum requirements. Although the name given to a rating system cannot fully convey its purpose, the marketing campaign will be more relevant and compelling if the name is easily understood. Examples of names given to State QRIS are available in the NCCCQI (2013) document *QRIS Definition and Statewide Systems* at [https://occqrisguide.icfwebservices.com/files/QRIS\\_Definition.pdf](https://occqrisguide.icfwebservices.com/files/QRIS_Definition.pdf).

Of the seven states that identified funding dedicated to QRIS outreach and marketing in the *Compendium of Quality Rating Systems and Evaluations* survey (Child Trends & Mathematica Policy Research, 2010), **Indiana** reported that they spent \$100,000 per year on marketing while others reported spending a percentage of their QRIS budget (**Pennsylvania** < 0.5 percent, **New Mexico** < 1 percent, **Vermont** 1 percent, **Ohio** 2 percent, **Iowa** less than 5 percent, **Minnesota** 10 percent).

Easy and widespread access to information on ratings is essential. States typically send providers that participate in QRIS a certificate that indicates the quality level they have attained; providers may choose whether to display this document. Some States include the rating on the license even if the QRIS is not part of the license itself (rated license) as a way to increase its visibility. An example of a rated license is available on **North Carolina's** Web site at [http://ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us/parents/pr\\_sn2\\_sl.asp](http://ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us/parents/pr_sn2_sl.asp).

The following list summarizes some strategies that States have used to increase initial awareness among consumers:

- **Public service announcements or paid advertisements**—People with public relations expertise can help craft the best message and identify the best stations and times of day to reach the intended audience. The use of non-written materials, such as television and radio announcements, can be especially helpful for families with low literacy levels and limited English proficiency. Tennessee succeeded in getting TV stations in the State's four major media markets to run a weekly feature announcing the results of programs that were rated. Media outlets in Ohio including Time Warner agreed to run a Step Up to Quality public service announcement free of charge.
- **Brochures and posters**—Materials about the importance of choosing quality care for children and how the rating can help with that choice can be shared at libraries, pediatrician's offices, employment offices, social service and health agencies, places of worship, and other locations where parents go. Many hospitals provide a packet of information to parents after the birth of their child, and they could include information on child care and QRIS. It is important that these materials provide a simple, compelling message.
- **Billboards**—Although expensive, billboards can be a very successful way to reach both families and the public at large to remind them of the State's commitment to early education. In metro areas, bus placards are also a highly visible approach.
- **Service providers**—Providers that could share information include child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies, the State child care licensing agency, the agency that authorizes child care subsidy or other benefit programs, home visitors, early intervention resource managers, and pediatricians. When possible, educating these messengers will help them feel comfortable with the message and support it.
- **Electronically distributed news releases**—State agencies often have access to a network of State newspapers. News releases should include contact people with the local licensing or CCR&R agency that can provide community statistics or recommend people to interview. Providers can be given a template that they can submit to the local newspaper with announcements about their ratings. A county

newspaper in Kentucky published the ratings of child care providers and the number of children served by each provider.

- **Magazines**—Periodicals read by parents can feature articles on choosing child care. A Denver magazine featured a front-page article on Colorado's Qualistar Early Learning ratings, causing calls to Qualistar to increase from 300 to 15,000 calls that month.
- **Web site listings**—Listings on Web sites can prominently display the QRIS level of providers to help parents identify quality child care. Web bloggers, especially those connected to Web sites frequented by parents, can be key messengers for similar information.
- **Videos**—Many States have developed videos that describe their QRIS or what to look for in quality child care. These are typically posted on Web sites, are available on social media sites such as YouTube or Facebook, or are shared in a variety of settings including provider trainings and other public events.
- **Social Media**—Facebook, Twitter, texting, and smart phone apps are growing mechanisms for communicating to a wide audience, and they are increasingly the preferred method of communication among young parents. Many CCR&Rs and some State agencies have Facebook pages and Twitter pages, and several States are developing smart phone apps for child care searches. Child Care Aware of America has an app called Child Care Finder where parents can search for child care in their area. These can be used to share rating information as well.

### DELAWARE FAMILY FRIENDLY WEB SITE AND STAKEHOLDER E-NEWS

Delaware's created a new family-friendly website, address below. This website includes a wealth of information for parents on topics including the Delaware Stars program, why quality matters, early brain development, and early learning at home. As part of the effort to drive families to the website as well as Facebook and Twitter, the Office of Early Learning recently ran a promotion through a contest that invited the public to visit the website, like their Facebook page, and follow them on Twitter. A simple sign-up entered participants in a weekly random drawing for a family fun pack, where they could win gift cards to movies, bowling, activity centers or museums, with multiple winners in each county. In just the first 5 weeks, more than 150 people entered and more than 40 family fun packs were awarded. In one month, traffic to the website more than doubled—with 5000 unique visitors during the campaign. In addition, the Office of Early Learning publishes a monthly electronic newsletter for a variety of audiences including providers and parents. Content includes the names of programs awarded 3, 4, or 5 stars, updates on Delaware's early childhood work, practice tips using the Delaware Early Learning Foundations (state early learning guidelines), profiles of local leaders in ECE, and summaries of recent policy and research trends. Early Childhood programs participating in Delaware Stars receive marketing materials to help them communicate with the families they serve and those they hope to serve in the future and the Office of Early Learning has created a promotional guide for them along with an ever-green calendar with activities to spur understanding and support for Stars that families can engage in the program.

<http://www.greatstartsdelaware.com/index.html>

## KENTUCKY HAS AN APP FOR THAT

Kentucky has two (2) portals available for assistance in locating STARS rated programs.

- The Division of Child Care's Kentucky Integrated Child Care System ("KICCS" Portal) helps parents find STARS-Rated Centers in their area searching by county or find their child's current center's STARS rated at <https://ssoexternal.chfs.ky.gov/adfs/ls/?wa=wsignin1.0&wtrealm=http%3a%2f%2fssointernal.chfs.ky.gov%2fadfs%2fservices%2ftrust&wctx=d372f0a2-8152-444a-a81d-3b95b1c01e69&wct=2015-02-20T17%3a55%3a58Z&rp-realm=https://kog.chfs.ky.gov%2fhome%2f>.
- *Kids Matter* is a smart phone app for finding child care in Kentucky. Users are able to search for a subsidy eligibility specialist or a child care program, and the app includes a child care checklist, an "ask the experts" feature, and links to additional resources.

## MARYLAND QRIS MARKETING VIDEO

Maryland developed a marketing video for a variety of audiences - early childhood and school-age programs, families choosing child care or early education for their children and for community/public awareness. The video was released six weeks ahead of the QRIS opening for statewide participation to draw attention to the initiative and the importance of high quality programs for children. The video was distributed to their agency's public relations office where it will be featured on their Facebook page and Twitter feed. Partners were asked to add it to their websites and distribute it further to their associations, resource and referral networks, other state agencies, and partners.

<http://marylandexcels.org/output/media.php?id=238651&type=Movie>

## FAMILY BROCHURE AND WEB SITE

**QUALITYstarsNY** has a dedicated website that contains information on all aspects of the project including the program standards and quality improvement strategies.

A general program brochure was created in 2011 to provide information on the QRIS. In 2013, a family brochure was developed to relay information about QUALITYstarsNY, tips on choosing a high-quality program, and ways to work with teachers to enhance a child's experience in the classroom. Brochures are disseminated to partner agencies and participating programs. A Web site also is in development that will provide additional resources to families, including those who have children with special needs. More information can be found at <http://qualitystarsny.org/parents-home.php>.



## NORTH CAROLINA'S MARKETING TO MULTIPLE AUDIENCES

North Carolina felt that the success of its Star Rated License system would be evidenced by high participation rates resulting from the providers' sense of ownership of the system and consumer demand. The State created a low-cost, high-impact marketing campaign with the following activities:

- Used the Web site to keep providers and parents informed.
- Developed a Web-based tool that allows parents to search for child care by rating and provides them with detailed program information. [http://ncchildcare.nc.gov/parents/pr\\_sn2\\_ov\\_sr.asp](http://ncchildcare.nc.gov/parents/pr_sn2_ov_sr.asp)
- Distributed thousands of posters, in English and Spanish, with attractive pictures and simple statements, such as "Is your child care as great as your child?—Demand the stars."
- Distributed materials on the rated license, including business cards and postcards with the Web address; distribution was through local partners, e.g., Smart Start partnerships, CCR&R agencies, health departments, departments of social services, libraries, human resource offices of businesses, offices of obstetricians and pediatricians.
- Participated in partner-sponsored Star meetings for providers to give them an opportunity to learn about QRIS and begin the application process.
- Gave providers press release templates along with their Star license to make it easy for them to send information to their local newspapers. Arranged for local partners, on an ongoing basis for the first year, to host local media events when a group of programs in their area received their star ratings.
- Arranged for the Governor to visit the first program to receive 15 out of 15 points, and provided additional press coverage for this accomplishment.
- Distributed monthly letters to legislators that listed programs in their area that had earned the Star license and a template for sending a congratulatory letter to the program.

## BRIGHTSTARS RHODE ISLAND TWITTER FEED

Rhode Island's **BrightStars** QRIS uses Twitter to share information with a variety of audiences. Followers of the feed can get information about grant opportunities for child care providers, family friendly community events, professional development opportunities, recalls, and names of programs that have joined BrightStars. To see or follow the Twitter feed, go to <https://twitter.com/BrightStarsRI>

## WISCONSIN'S YOUNGSTAR MEDIA CAMPAIGN

Wisconsin's media campaign for its **YoungStar** QRIS included a press release, billboards, and radio spots aimed at parents with young children. In addition, full city buses were covered with the content from the billboards. <http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar/media.htm>

Determining the best time to launch an awareness campaign aimed at families deserves thoughtful consideration. Early in the program, it is important to build an understanding of the QRIS and encourage parents to seek providers with a higher rating. As a note of caution, parents may become frustrated and concerned for their child's well-being if they cannot find providers with higher ratings. This disappointment may be lessened if a measure of accessibility is set, e.g., a percentage of programs participating or

participation levels by county, before launching a marketing campaign. **Rhode Island** decided to delay the launch of its parent outreach campaign until 20 percent of the licensed centers in the State participated in the initiative.

### OKLAHOMA'S PUBLIC AWARENESS STRATEGIES

Oklahoma delayed the launch of its **Reaching for the Stars** public awareness campaign for parents until most counties had a program above the One-Star level. To inform parents, the State used television and radio public service announcements, advertisements before movies in theatres, brochures and posters in many public places, and billboards. When child care providers attained a higher level, they were given a certificate, window decal, and newspaper article template to submit to their local newspaper. Some licensing staff loaned them yard signs and banners to proclaim their achievement. Providers' Star status is clearly displayed when a parent uses the on-line Child Care Locator to obtain a list of licensed facilities at <http://www.okdhs.org/programsandservices/cc/prnts/docs/cclupdates.htm>. For providers, all staff received a lapel pin reflecting their program's star status, and they were recognized at early childhood State conferences.

### *Incentives for parents to choose higher rated providers*

Experience from other fields suggests that financial incentives can help change consumer behavior. Several States are experimenting with this approach and creating consumer-based incentives linked to QRIS. Several years ago **Maine** doubled the State dependent care tax credit for parents who used an early childhood program that was at Step 4 of the State's Quality for ME initiative. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this financial incentive increased the number of parents who inquired about quality, which subsequently increased the number of providers participating in accreditation facilitation projects and career development in early and school-age care and education. In 2007, the **Louisiana** legislature passed a package of School Readiness Tax Credits (SRTC) linked to Quality Start, the Louisiana QRIS. The package, which took effect on January 1, 2008, includes a refundable State dependent care tax credit for families with children younger than age 6. The value of the credit increases based on the star rating of the center the child attends. Additional information about Louisiana's tax credits is available in the "Provider Incentives and Support" section. Several States that received Race to the Top—ELC funding have proposed a reduced co-payment for families that choose providers at higher quality levels.

### *Providing information about the ratings to parents and the public on an ongoing basis*

The challenge of every marketing campaign is that customers generally do not pay attention to information unless it is something that is meaningful to them at the time. Promotional and educational efforts, therefore, must be ongoing or repeated periodically. Parents with a child already in child care should be encouraged to ask about their program's QRIS level. The cultural and linguistic diversity of families requires that information be available in many languages and formats.

In addition to the strategies listed previously, most States post QRIS ratings on the Internet. QRIS Web sites can be a very effective way to disseminate information to consumers, funders, and providers; however, the Web sites need to be easily accessed, attractively designed, easy to navigate, and kept up-to-date with the most current information. States can provide information in multiple languages over the Internet, which is a growing source of information for all families. In some States, parents can choose to sort and view programs based on their QRIS level.

The following are examples of States that have information on their QRIS Web sites specifically for parents:

- **Arizona:** <http://www.qualityfirstaz.com/parents-and-families/>;
- **Colorado:** <http://www.qualistar.org/family-resources.html>;
- **Kentucky:** <http://chfs.ky.gov/dcbs/dcc/stars/starsparentinfo.htm>;
- **Minnesota:** <http://parentawaratings.org/parent-resources>;
- **Nevada:** <https://sites.google.com/site/nvsilverstatestars/home/parents-families>;
- **New Mexico:** [https://www.newmexicokids.org/content/parents\\_and\\_families/](https://www.newmexicokids.org/content/parents_and_families/);
- **New York:** <http://qualitystarsny.org/parents-home.php>;
- **Pennsylvania:** [http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=Programs\\_STARS\\_Families](http://www.pakeys.org/pages/get.aspx?page=Programs_STARS_Families);
- **Rhode Island:** <http://www.brightstars.org/parents/>;
- **Vermont:** <http://dcf.vermont.gov/cdd/stars/>;
- **Washington:** <http://www.del.wa.gov/care/qris/families.aspx>; and
- **Wisconsin:** <http://dcf.wisconsin.gov/youngstar/parents.htm>.

CCR&R agencies can be encouraged to include QRIS information in their referral database and distribute QRIS information to parents.

### COLORADO HELPS PARENTS USE QRIS RATINGS TO CHOOSE A PROGRAM

Colorado's **Qualistar** Early Learning Web site allows parents to view Qualistar-rated early childhood programs' Early Learning Report, a summary that describes how the program scored in each of the five quality components of the Qualistar rating as well as the overall star rating. The five components include learning environment, family partnerships, training and education, adult to child ratios and group size, and accreditation. A parent resource, "Working Your Way Through the Child Care Maze" provides information about choosing quality child care and more details on understanding the Quality Rating and Improvement System and the components listed above. More information on Qualistar can be found at <http://www.qualistar.org/the-qualistar-rating.html>. Denver parents that are seeking a preschool program for their 4-year old can search for providers by star level and location and read a program description at <http://www.dpp.org/>.

### LOUISIANA PARENT BROCHURE

Louisiana has a brochure geared toward parents that explains its **Quality Start** ratings program. It includes information on why programs participate, what the ratings mean, and why to choose a Quality Start center. A copy of the brochure can be found here: <http://www.qrsloisiana.org/assets/files/Parents%20Brochure.pdf>.

### NEW MEXICO'S WEB PAGE HELPFUL TO PARENTS

At the New Mexico Kids Web site, a brief summary of **Look for the STARS** describes the quality standards, and a Parent's Guide to Selecting Quality Child Care includes additional information on Look for the STARS. A listing of child care providers includes the STAR status. The Web site also has links to other important information for parents including child care assistance, health resources and recalls of children's products. The Web site can be viewed at <http://newmexicokids.org/>.

Several public and private agencies, such as the State licensing and child care subsidy agencies, CCR&R agencies, and community service providers, may have a role to play in ensuring that parents



have up-to-date information on QRIS. It is helpful for States to have a mechanism that various partner agencies can use to communicate their approaches to information sharing.

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